

Language Policy in Nigeria: Problems, Prospects and Perspectives

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Abstract

The need for a national lingual franca that indexes the national identity of Nigeria is one that has been theorized and debated through different lenses under language policy with the conflicting themes being the asymmetric relationship between an exogenous language – English – and the local languages. The gap that has not been given the needed attention is the intra-indigenous language dichotomy that exists between minority languages and the major languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – in the formulation of a more inclusive language policy for Nigeria. This paper argues for a multilingual language policy that takes into account the different tiers of languages in Nigeria, particularly, languages with lesser number of speakers than the major languages.

Keywords: Multilingualism, minority languages, language policy, majority languages

Introduction

It is creativity and beauty based upon ethnic and linguistic diversity that makes man human. The absence of this diversity would lead to the dehumanization, and utter impoverishment of man

Joshua A. Fishman.

Nigeria is an example of a multilingual, pluralistic and heterogeneous African state with a history of British colonization. The natural implication of these diversities is that language becomes a principal source of individual identity and also a social-political capital for interaction across different cultural and political borders. To further complicate this milieu is the colonial language bequeathed to the nation by the imperialist (Adetugbo 1979). The debate therefore has been what language(s) should function in the lives of the people given the various political, cultural, cognitive and economical role language plays in the socio-political architecture of nation. Different scholars have taken different contentious and contestable positions on this polemics. Earlier debates on the language policy in Nigeria had centered on the conflicting importance of indigenous and exogenous languages in Nigeria (Adekunle 1972, Bamgbose 1992, 2005, Aito 2005, Akinnaso 1992, Banjo 1995 and Oyetade 2003). This paper argues from a different trajectory of diglossic language policy such that gives functional roles to both exogenous and indigenous languages. To achieve the stated goal, the paper delves into the historical and sociolinguistic factors that forged Nigeria's linguistic situation. The thesis demonstrates that ethnic diversity has always been a part of the people living around the Niger; that being the case, ethnicity and ethnic diversity is not the problem of the nation but the politicizing of ethnicity along linguistic parameters. Finally, a proposal for a more inclusive language policy that recognizes the importance of the local languages in special domains of the lives of the people concludes the argument advanced in this paper.

The Historical Background

To best understand Nigeria's complex linguistic situation, a historical overview of the traditional societies from the past to the present becomes crucial. In a succinct and abridged fashion, the fragmentation that divides the history of the nation into its various chapters is examined. In what follows, Nigeria's ethnolinguistic history is discussed in order to locate the internal forces that drive policy change and to fully appreciate and appraise the language policy strategy discussed in this paper.

Language Situation in the Pre-Colonial Era

Perhaps, one of the highest legacies bequeathed to Africa by colonialism is the political organism now known as the state. The Colonial masters organized different ethnic groups into a political unit for ease of governance and economic exploitations paying less attention to their cultural and linguistic diversities (Rodney 1973).

Before Nigeria came in contact with Europe and colonization, it existed as a sprawling territory of diverse ethnic groups, with each group having a distinct (and to some extent overlapping) historical, linguistic, cultural patterns expressed in traditional socio-political, educational and religious systems (Ajayi and Smith 1964, Dike 1956, Enoch 1996). Therefore in the northern hemisphere, there existed the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Eggon, Mada, Tiv and the Nupes to mention a few. In the Southern protectorate are the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Efik, and Ibibio etc. These ethnic groups were in constant contact with one another through various economic activities and military expansionism. From the standpoint of history, it is understood that there were really no completely isolated tribe; rather, there were different socio-political interaction among the different ethnic groups that constitute what is today known as Nigeria (Ajayi 1967). These contacts and transactions brought about linguistic and cultural exchange. Cultural and linguistic contact, no doubt, led to linguistic borrowing and adaptation of new vocabularies and patterns but not necessarily linguistic domination or annexation. If this claim of history is correct, it is safe to say that linguistic diversities have always been part of the people living around the Niger. For example there are lot of cognate words in ¹Hausa and Yoruba that suggests that the two languages came in contact at some point in history. Another type of linguistic contact that Nigeria experienced happened in the late sixteen century when British missionaries and traders came into the coastal regions of Lagos and Calabar (Omamor, 1991; Elugbe, 1995; Egbokhare, 2001; Esizimotor, 2002b; Adegbija, 2003 and Esizimotor 2010). While the missionaries were concerned with Christian evangelization the merchants were interested in slave trade. After slave trade was abolished in 1807, some of Nigerian slaves who had acquired Western Education came back home with English as a foreign asset and would later serve as interpreters and copyists to the missionaries. One of them was the popular Ajayi Crowder who translated the English Bible into Yoruba language (Huber 1999). This was the beginning of the implantation of English in Nigeria. Going by this historical position, it is safe to conclude that English predates colonization in Nigeria.

Language Situation at the Colonia Era

When Britain took over as the colonial power in Nigeria, English became the tool with which the new territory would be administered. Hence English became the language of administration (Bamgbose 1991, Lawal 2004). It was the language to be used in official domains of the lives of the colonized. Also, as the missionaries established more schools and propagated the gospel message and western education, the language became the prestigious language of the educated. Finally in 1882, the colonial government intervened in the system of education by promulgating a law that made English the language of instruction at schools and as a subject that must be taught in at all stages of educational growth (Adetugbo 1979). This was necessarily so as the major goal of the colonial powers was to make the colonized assimilate into their culture and way of life. However, the indigenous languages were allowed to be taught in schools alongside English (but not as the primary medium of communication). However, the attitude of people to English particularly in the southern part of the country was more positive than in the North. People readily sent their children to schools to be educated in English. The religious proselytes had their baptismal names in English. Thus English assumed another economic function in that it became a ladder to attaining social mobility under the imperial government. Hence, English became not only the language of administration and religion; it was immediately dignified as the language of the upper class and the elites. In the northern region, the response and attitude to English was quite different from the southerners. For one, the Christian mission was not as successful in the north as it did with the south. For this reason, the western education that was projected along with the gospel message could not diffuse easily through the north. The use of English was restricted only to the traditional Hausa/Fulani feudal class. The Hausas took to their Arabo-Asiatic language and their Islamic religion while a very small percentage of them embraced Christianity. This dichotomy between the north and the south along linguistic, cultural and religious lines still exist today. Without paying cognizance to these differences, the colonial authority of those days amalgamated the Southern and the Northern protectorate for ease of governance and made English the official national language to administer the linguistically heterogeneous state.

Language Situation at the Post-Colonial Era

The linguistic situation in the post-colonial Nigeria is so complex that it has been described as the biblical tower of Babel. The first tier of language found in Nigeria is the exogenous (English) language bequeathed to the nation by the Colonial rulers.

Today, English has grown to become the official national language of Nigeria and continues to play important roles in the nation as the language of education, media, religion (especially the Pentecostal Christian faith), and the language of politics, governance and law. It is the language of the elites and also the first language for some Nigerians. Also, the basilectal variety of the English language in Nigeria called the Nigerian Pidgin is a neutral language spoken across every ethnic and social boundary in the nation. Other exogenous languages with less influence are Arabic and French. The Arabic language has a major political and religious weight in the northern part of the country. It became the language of Islamic education for the northern part of the country after the Usman Dan Fodio Jihad war between 1804-1808.

The present language ethnography records over five hundred and twenty-one languages and ethnic groups in the nation. These indigenous languages have been stratified as majority and minority languages based on the population of speakers. This population-based system of classification has inherent political problems as it technically describes the minority group as occupying a marginal position in the scheme of things in the nation's politics. A classification of this sort smacks of ethnic consciousness and polarity with language as the symbol. Nigeria is now defined along a linguistic line of major languages and minority languages. Given that Nigeria as a polity is an amalgamation of diverse ethnic groups; the larger part of these ethnic groups has the pejorative status of "the minority". However from a linguistic standpoint, the government has conveniently recognized three major languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba - because they all have over twenty million speakers (Oyetade 2003). Other languages such as Tiv, Itekiri, Urhobo, Esan, Fulfude, Epira, Nupe, Kanuri, Ibibio, Efik and Gwari to mention a few with over one million speakers are considered the minority languages (Bamgbose 1992). One must speak of some other languages smaller than the minority languages with speakers ranging between a hundred to five hundred thousand speakers. These smaller minority languages have the linguistic importance in their respective local communities.

Since Nigeria became a nation in 1960, ethnolinguistic and political pressures have led to the change in the regional government practiced in the first republic to the creation of twelve states in 1967; nineteen in 1976, twenty one in 1987; thirty in 1991 and thirty six states were created by 1996. The consistent demand made by these so-called minority language speakers for state or local government autonomy further suggests that they feel marginalized in the life of the nation. Between 1998 and 2014, there is that continual call from different ethnic minority groups for political autonomy from larger ethnic groups. This may appear reasonable politically speaking but again, this is ethnic politicizing with language as the weapon. For example, the Owe speaking ethnic group of the present Kogi State staged a protest at the National Assembly house for an autonomous Owe State to gain linguistic and economic liberation from the dominant Igala people. Clamors of this type point to the fact that Nigeria is rife with persistent intra-ethnic tensions among the majority and the non-majority language speakers. While it is convenient to say that the major language spoken in the northern hemisphere is Hausa, it cannot be denied that there are several other minority languages that have been displaced by the Hausa language and culture. Therefore Hausa continues to thrive as the big whale that swallows the other less spoken languages in the north and drive them into extinction. The same is true of Yoruba in the Western part of the country. The Awori and Eegun languages spoken in Lagos region are endangered by the regional lingual franca-Yoruba. The linguistic situation of the post-colonial Nigeria is thus a complex-multilayered mosaic of exogenous and indigenous languages of varying linguistic importance.

Table 1: Language Types

| S/N | Types | Languages |
|-----|------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Exogenous | English, French, Arabic |
| 2 | Indigenous | Over 521 |
| 3 | Neutral | English pidgin |

The Need for a Multilingual Language Planning and Policy

Language planning has been defined as the deliberate intervention by the government or the power that be on language. It is a conscious effort made on a language to change the condition of the language. Such changes are targeted toward altering the status of a language and the linguistic range and functionality of the language. Thus language planning has to do with improving the social status of a language by a policy that empowers the said language with a status it has not enjoyed hitherto. Since Nigeria got independence in 1960, there has not been any such exercise.

Oyetade (2003) observes that language planning as an organized and systematic pursuit of solutions to language problems has remained largely peripheral to the mainstream of national planning. One place a policy on language was ever mentioned in the Nigerian constitution is the policy of language in education in which the mother tongue was allowed to be the medium of instruction at primary schools along with English. Given the complex linguistic situation described above, one will be forced to ask which language should function in some special domains in the lives of Nigerians and what is the linguistic right of the people in the minority group? From the earlier works on language policy in Nigeria, three different positions or suggestion have been proposed in. I shall examine the different positions taken and the implication(s) of each choice presently.

The Nationalist Orientation

It is the opinion of some writers that the nation should adopt one of her indigenous languages as the national lingual Franca. By this, they claim that the nation will have a total emancipation from her colonial legacy. This position appears beneficial when one thinks of the fact that Nigeria has over five hundred languages none of which is used at any national capacity. Proponents of this orientation posit that the adoption of an indigenous language would obliterate the elitism created by English and engender a level playing ground for equal intellectual, political and economical participation by the masses. This view generally holds that the suppression of English will be the promotion of indigenous languages and culture. While the nationalist ideal may be well intended, there are some socio-political factors that are drawbacks to this proposal. The question that immediately arises is which indigenous language should be chosen and accorded the preferred status of a national language? Some have argued that one of the three majority languages should be chosen given that they have a considerable number of speakers. That however has a divisive capacity to steer ethnic consciousness and defeat the sense of nationhood that the nationalist agenda seek to project. Akinnaso (1994) observes that Nigerians are religiously loyal to their mother tongues and are contemptuous of other local languages. That observation is correct if the argument of language loyalty is constructed within a locus of intra-ethnic language choice, what seems to be the case however, is that Nigerian people are likely to privilege an exogenous/foreign but dominant language over their mother tongue that serves the local functions of identity and cultural authenticity marking. But not to stray away from the point made by Akinnaso (1994), a language, beyond serving communicative purposes, carries indexical attributes marking social, cultural and political identity. This ethnic attachment to language is a major reason why the choice of one indigenous language as the official language will forever be a mirage. There is the salient fear of domination of the minority languages by the majority ones. To empower an indigenous language, as the national language is to by extension, empower the ethnicity of that chosen language above others. This will definitely do more harm than good in a system where ethnic tension is visible as manifested in the creation of ethnic militia groups and the politics of federal character.

The Internationalist Perspective

Another attempt on the issue of national language policy in Nigeria is the one that favors an exogenous language over the indigenous ones. Those who are of this of this view adduce to the argument that centers on the multiculturalism and multilingualism of Nigeria. To them, English performs the task of unifying the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. English therefore should be seen as serving a pragmatic advantage in the life of the nation. Nigeria, they claim, cannot exist as a national entity without English as the mechanism for governance and administration. English is Nigeria's language of literature; it is Nigeria's archival and library language. It canonizes the nation's history and law. To this extent, English should be seen as part and parcel of the nation's life and not as an extraneous language or a mere colonial tool. The internationalist posits that no indigenous language could bear the functional weight that English carries in the nation's linguistic economy and as such it should continue to hold sway as the nation's lingua franca. The contention with this position is that the exogenous language has successfully displaced the indigenous languages from performing visible functions in the lives of the people. Also, proponents of this view do not seem to take into consideration the potentiality of an indigenous language being empowered to a high level status to the degree that it successfully replaces English or any other exogenous language. Given that language and culture are two inseparable phenomena, a bilingual person is also bicultural. We have a situation in which bilingual Nigerian youths are not only bilingual but also bicultural. They are citizens of two countries with no deep cultural or linguistic affinity to any. Another argument raised against this perspective comes from the platform of language and education. For cultural and cognitive reasons, it is commonly said that the use of indigenous mother tongue for pedagogical purposes is to be encouraged above exogenous languages.

The Neutralist Position

An alternative proposal raised by some scholars assumes a neutral position on the indigenous-exogenous debate on national lingual franca. They are neither in support of English as a national language nor support any indigenous language as a possible national official language. They believe that the basilectal variety of the English language spoken in Nigeria called the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) could perform the task of an official language. This is because it is not a native of any tribe or ethnicity and as such it has the capacity to create ethnic cohesion. Another justification for Nigerian Pidgin is that it is the language of the masses. While English continues to perform 'high' language functions in Nigeria, Pidgin English has almost taken over the role of lingua franca in informal domains. It is to be noted that every social stratum in Nigeria uses it, educated and illiterates, the rich and the poor, the upper class or lower class all use pidgin for communicative purposes.

As a major linguistic factor in Nigeria, it has evolved from a simple rudimentary commercial language between mercantilist Europeans and Nigerians in trade situations in the nineteenth century into a more functional language of interethnic communication between Nigerians of different ethnic backgrounds and has gained native speakers for whom the language is now a creole. Pidgin is not only used in public spaces like the stores, parks, and marketplaces, it has become the means of interethnic communication in informal discourse in offices in linguistically heterogeneous cities like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt. In recent years, Pidgin has become the language of advertising. It is freely used as the language of media (both print and audio media). A lot of Pentecostal songs are done in Pidgin. Presently, Pidgin is the language of the pervasive hip-hop culture in Nigeria. Notwithstanding, Pidgin remains stigmatized and unacceptable in official domains. The attitude of the elites to it is quite negative. It is viewed as a corrupt form of language that is associated with the illiterates. Some puritanical linguists concern is that it poses a great threat to the teaching of Standard English in schools. This pejorative attitude to Pidgin has consistently made it to be out of place in the nation's language policy despite its functionality.

Towards a Multilingual Language Policy

From the forgoing, it is clear that the language situation in Nigeria is so complex that it will be unrealistic to explain this complexity engaging only one model of policy. None of the proposals discussed earlier is without a benefit and a defect. The proposal in this paper is to suggest a multifaceted language policy that is broad enough to accommodate the different classes and types of language in Nigeria. This theoretical framework is adopted from the work of Adekunle (1972) who classifies Nigerian languages in terms of provinces, states and local government. Adekunle's work gave us a picture into the language situation of Nigeria when it operated under different provincial headquarters. Today, Nigeria is divided into thirty-six states and a federal capital territory, the language situation is no different from what it was in 1972, rather, it has become far more complex by the creation of more states and the clamor for new political identities by the minority groups. The approach proposed is a multilingual policy in which there is a language hierarchy from the local to the national. The language multilingual language policy will assign functions to languages in the order of the hierarchy described below:

1. National Lingual Franca
2. Regional Lingual Franca
3. State Lingual Franca
4. Local languages

The position of the present writer is that English has the functional capacity of a national language in Nigeria. The language, though a colonial heritage, has become a major emblem of the Nigerian nation since independence. It is the language that indexes Nigeria history as a political creation a non-native variety, English in Nigeria has become nativized like other varieties such as Singaporean, Indian, Jamaican and Ghanaian Englishes to mention a few. English is no longer a foreign language as Nigerians have indigenized it. Within the Nigerian linguo-scape, the variety of English spoken by the Igbos is different both in sound and in structure from the one spoken by a Hausa person or Yoruba person or any other ethnicity. Nigerians can now claim ownership to a variety of English that has become natural to them, a variety that has been domesticated and as such, capable of expressing their socio-cultural world view. Secondly, in a multicultural context like Nigeria a language that could foster national identity and democratic cohesion is necessary. For practical reasons, English remains the preferred choice given its tribal neutrality; it is capable of unifying the nation's linguistic diversities.

As it has been pointed out earlier, Nigerians are ethnic conscious and so long there is ethnic suspicion, it will be difficult if not impossible to elevate an indigenous language in status higher than the rest. This can create another civil war in the country. Another reason to maintain the status quo is that none of our languages at the present has been so developed internally and structurally to carry the weight of a national lingua franca. In addition to the earlier points made, English should be privileged as the national language is for economic reasons and international relations. English doubtlessly is a world language and has become the language of science and technology in the twenty first century. The language has left its aboriginal home of the Anglo-Saxons to becoming the world number one language as predicted by John Adams (the second president of the United States) in, when he boldly surmised that “English will be the most respectable language in the world and the most universally read and spoken in the next century, if not before the end of this one.” It is destined “in the next and succeeding centuries to be more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age” (Dyer 2012).

With this reality of the present world, it seems unprofitable, at least, in the sense of international relations, for Nigeria to abandon English as a national language for any other language whether exogenous or indigenous. The transition from English to an indigenous language is not impossible but will definitely take a lot of preparation and planning. An overnight shift from English to any other language as national language will be impractical and improbable as things stand. As a preparation to the ultimate goal of transition, it is suggested that the nation begins to allow the indigenous languages to function maximally in their local domains. These languages should be empowered as language of business in the state house of assembly. The state media houses should be allowed to do their transmission via the languages. Also these languages, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa should not just be taught subjects in schools. They can become the medium of instruction in primary and secondary schools as regional lingua franca. To achieve this aim of mother tongue literacy, the government will have to be ready to provide the resources for corpus planning and language development. By using indigenous languages for all classroom purposes, the nation will be ready for a total break off from exogenous languages in other domains. On minority languages, it is my candid opinion that the nation can harness them as tools for adult literacy. They can also be used as state or local government lingua franca. By using them as the language of administration at the grass root level, the government can be more effective in the lives of the rural people and the aged who are usually the speakers of the minority languages. Regarding the Nigerian Pidgin, the present writer is of the opinion that the Nigerian government need give a policy-driven attention to the language as a possible informal national lingua franca. Taking a cue from New Guinea as an example of a nation that adopted a Melanesian Pidgin as the nation’s official language, a governmental intervention can expand its functionality and status through scholarly activities of codification.

Conclusion

The linguistic diversity of Nigeria can profit the nation if a multilingual language policy in which all classes of language are given due recognition is embarked upon. It is not the fact of ethnicity and linguistic diversity that constructs social problems in Nigeria; rather it is the politicizing of these differences that is the problem. Therefore ethnic diversity and multilingualism are themes that are inherent part of the nation since its creation. The proposal in this paper is for a language policy that is focused on linguistic equity for both exogenous and indigenous languages. This paper makes an attempt to resolve the majority-minority dichotomy that exists along linguistic line in the nation by allocating domains for different tiers of languages that is found in the nation. Without trying to be simplistic, the author recognises that the four –tier language hierarchy proposed in this paper is by no means a sacrosanct order on how languages are meant to function in Nigeria. It is designed to be an alternative policy model that can be all-inclusive of Nigeria’s multilingualism.

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